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Frankie Paino

ANGELS OF FIRE

Out west, fire swallows an ever-widening circle
of forest tonight, like a wish kissed on a coin
and cast in a fountain will repeat itself, grow
larger over water's silver surface. On TV,
a reporter stands in the fluttery glow. It spills
into our room, stains your pale skin infernal,
lovely as any good sin, or the monarch butterflies
one June which set the sky alight, the hushed applause
of their delicate wings dusting our breath with gold.

It was the last summer we possessed the shapes of boys,
which is no shape, really, and we'd run, shirtless,
beneath acres of sheltering oak, sweat lacquering
our chests as the sky slit its own throat and heat
shimmered off asphalt, set our neighbourhood afloat.

Down the street, fire caught a classmate of ours
so unaware that when she woke it was not in this world
where her mattress steamed like an ancient altar and her
silhouette, coiled around itself like a cat in a sunlit
window, slept on its side even after her slight body
was clothed in cool satin, strewn with blushed rose
petals handed to us by black-mantled nuns as we filed
past the alabaster casket which stood open like a music
box whose tiny dancer had grown tired of the dance. You
whispered your envy to me in the vaulted shadows
of that church, how she had become like those eider-winged
spirits who graced the stained glass windows or rose
above the crèche's spare gable each winter~as if
death transmutes without discretion, each one of us
destined for the same eternity.

I remember how we walked to your angel's house
three days after she died. The scent of smoke and water.

Silence like a shrine. I can still see the foyer
going dim with evening, blackened ribs of lumber
which once held the roof at its elegant pitch, ghost
shadows seared against walls~clock, cabinet, crucifix~
as if each object was only briefly absent and meant
to take form again like the closed faces of night-blooming
jasmine at noon. The gunmetal tang of an approaching
storm drifted through shattered windows as we climbed
the winding stairs, and when you smiled, turned
towards me, failing sun caught in your hair like braids
of beaten copper. Then you leaned against the balustrade
which seemed to melt beneath your hands, spindles of ash
crumbling as you faltered, then disappeared into grey
atmosphere.

If I prayed, it was for the gift of wings. And if
that prayer was answered, it was the same reply Icarus
received. Then there was only the sound of a distant
mower. No breath. No cry from you who lay perfectly still
as that child in her grave. I cradled you the way water
holds the quiet bodies of the drowned, each moment's passing
like the sound of *goodbye*. When I pressed my mouth
over yours it was the taste of the coming rain. Then
lightning cut the sky like bright ribbons torn from
unexpected packages and you gasped, lungs filling
with charcoaled air.

Tonight, you said it must have been an angel who bore you
out of the luminous throat which had swallowed you whole
and back to this world where your body looked like a stranger
held fast in my embrace. My Love, I don't believe in angels,
unless they are only hungry ghosts of the reluctant dead
haunted by memories of our sensible gifts. Angels of fire.
Of storms. Angels transfixed by that long-ago sky flecked
with impossible gold or the simple beauty of prised

candlelight caught in sweat which beads between the soft
rise of your breasts, whose envy turned a blind eye as
flames ate their way up those stairs now decades gone.
Whose mercy flung out an unseen net to hold you dazed
but unharmed, your breath dark as the underbellies
of rain-laden clouds. The thrum of your heart like
an ovation. Like thunder.

THE BINDING OF ISAAC

Perhaps it was a voice like ten-thousand bowstrings
drawn tight as a well-kept secret, a sound which rose

from a nimbus of flies that vexed the inarticulate
tongue of a sacrificial dove. Or perhaps it was

the unanswering stillness when woven garlands,
grain, gems, lay strewn in elaborate temples,

salvation's map withheld for want of a throat opened
wide as a traitorous smile~whatever could possess

a father to take in one hand, fire, the other, a curved
blade, bind his beautiful son ankle to wrist,

ankle to wrist, cuffs of blood circling bone like
bands of gold as morning unbolted the crimson sky.

Then there was only the rough stone altar. No voice
appeased by blind obedience. No swift and

muscular angel summoned to stay the gnarled hand.
Just a young man curled around the shape of his breath,

his long brow, abrupt chin, familiar as the rasp
of sand against yellowed teeth, the truth of what